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ABSTRACT

A "Communications Day" event aimed at area high school juniors and seniors was developed at John Carroll University, near Cleveland, Ohio. Flourishing since its beginning in 1978, the day-long seminar is intended to give students the opportunity to hear from and question experts in all phases of radio, television, and newspaper work. A typical Communications Day (with attendance of up to 1,400 students) is broken into three sessions or blocks plus lunch, usually with six simultaneous sessions offered in each block. It involves careful planning and sincere cooperation between the university's Communications Department and local commercial media companies (consisting of Cleveland's major daily newspaper, and a major local television station and radio station), who recognize its potential and who benefit from the association. The university, in turn, is able to acquaint a large number of area students with the campus and its programs. (SR)

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Background

John Carroll University is a Jesuit institution of about 3,250 full time undergraduates located in a suburban area near Cleveland, Ohio. Its Communication Department was founded in the late '60's and today is one of the larger departments with approximately 190 majors. The department encompasses theatre, journalism and public relations, speech, debate, speech pathology, and mass communications. The University maintains a student operated standard FM station, which, because of location, has a potential audience approaching 2,000,000. Beginning in the late '70's the institution began putting more emphasis on the television side of mass communication. In 1985 the senior position was upgraded, a commitment made to better facilities and a faculty person with professional experience sought. Today a rising number of graduates are finding places in broadcast-related positions.

Concurrent with this increase in emphasis on mass communication, the University, with massive cooperation from three local communication companies, developed the concept of a "Communications Day" aimed at the high school juniors and seniors of the area. The program, begun in 1978, has flourished and been very successful from everyone's point of view.

Overview

The general concept of a day-long seminar to give students the opportunity to hear from and question experts in all phases of radio, television and newspapers emerged from a series of conversations among the communications chair and representatives of the Cleveland Plain Dealer, the city's major daily, WKYC-TV/Ch. 3, at that time owned by NBC network and WMMS/FM, for many years at or near the top in ratings locally and highly rated nationally. Its primary focus was album-oriented rock. An attendance limit of 1250 was set, but this became more a goal than a reality. Registration generally approached 1400 as delayed letters and sad stories take hold.

A typical Communications Day is broken into three sessions or blocks plus lunch. Normally 6 simultaneous seminars are scheduled in each block with some of the more popular topics offered in two different blocks. The common format is brief presentations by each of the participants, usually 4, occasionally 3, followed by questions until the hour expires. Generally, each company is represented on each panel with a communications department member as moderator.

Typical seminar topics include careers in production, performance, programming, news gathering, advertising, public relations, engineering and graphic design. A continuing theme throughout is the competition for existing jobs and the need for

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more education because of the uncertainty of the future.

Buses from area schools start arriving shortly after 9:00 a.m. although the official start isn't until 9:30. An opening "convocation" is held in Kulas Auditorium where a senior representative from each agency extends greetings and the usual words of encouragement. The chair of the Communications Department then reviews procedures and room locations and adjourns the meeting to the first seminars. When the first sessions end students are directed to the varsity gym where box lunches and milk await. As some pacing is valuable here, the ending time for the first groups is not vigorously enforced. A popular session, modestly extended, eases the crunch. A multiple series of food lines and plenty of bleacher seating keeps the situation well in hand.

The sessions resume at noon with the final gathering at 1:00, ending at 2:00 p.m. This permits time to load buses and get back to the schools somewhere near normal dismissal time. At the end of the final session the students are asked to complete and turn in an evaluation form.

The program has consistently been viewed as very successful by all concerned. The patterns are so well established that the amount of advanced planning is limited. Because the University has a "Reading Day" between the end of classes the first week in May and the start of final exams, the appropriate date is evident. The rooms are clear and the number of "readers" inconvenienced by noise very minimal. At most, fall and mid-winter meetings are needed to pin down details and changes. The planning group, basically the public relations directors of the three stations, the communications chair and the senior mass communications instructor has seen very little turnover during the duration. Only in the case of the radio station has there been more than one change. The planners have done an excellent job keeping their respective managers appraised and supportive of these efforts. This has resulted in no quibbles over costs and regular participation by the "big names" of each organization.

Operation

As the fall meeting tends to be a review of the previous spring, the mid-winter session is when most of the work is done. Seminar topics are reviewed, some are added, occasionally one is dropped. Rooms are assigned on the basis of previous typical attendance and any logistical matters reviewed. A small registration fee, presently $4.50 is required. This sum primarily covers the cost of the lunches, including those given to speakers. Further it improves the element of control over the registration process and adds "value to the proceedings". Key dates are set for the delivery of participants names, bios and photographs to the Plain Dealer which prints the materials. The promotional mailings are assembled by WKYC-TV and labels stuck and envelopes mailed by WMMS. Two waves are mailed, in each case one packet to the principal and one to the guidance department.

The Plain Dealer Public Relations Department bears the greatest burden as they also receive the registrations and seem to field the greatest number of questions. A month before the date, the three companies begin publicity campaigns. The Plain Dealer provides 4-5 ads, each about 1/6 of a page placed in various quality locations in the paper over the four weeks. Each includes pictures, a summary of the activities and instructions to see the guidance counselors. As Communications Day falls when the public schools are in session, all participants must enroll through their schools. WKYC-TV contributes a 30 second PSA taped on campus usually featuring popular speakers. WMMS makes both standard PSA announcements and weaves invitations into the chatter of their DJ's.

Each student, on arrival, receives a packet of materials in a WMMS promotional bag. Its primary item is the day's program, usually 18 8 1/2 x 11 pages plus cover complete with photographs. Each of the other agencies, including the University add informational or promotional items. These are delivered to the University a few days in advance, so a student group, presently the Society of Collegiate Journalists, a Communication Department club, can stuff the bags. On Communications Day, this group, in blazers or other distinguishing attire,provide extremely valuable help directing students to the proper locations, pointing out the restrooms, dispensing food and providing an official "presence."

Joyfully, the event has never had a major problem. Occasionally groups have arrived claiming registration when none was to be found, but there is sufficient slack to handle them. On warm sunny days some students slip away to explore the campus or the neighborhood. Some groups are closely chaperoned while others are unescorted. One year,when the food service provided apples in the lunches there was an incident of boys throwing them at passing cars. Unwisely they were wearing their high school jackets and were promptly apprehended when they arrived back at their school.

The invitations are mailed to the public and private schools in the area roughly represented by the coverage of WKYC-TV/Ch. 3. The Plain Dealer coverage is larger and WMMS slightly smaller, but certainly the high congruency is an advantage. Some schools regularly send sizeable groups while others send few or none. Most school officials, particularly those who also attend, feel the program is very worthwhile. Some others may view it as too much of a recreational day.

The question sessions are usually lively and for the most part quite thoughtful. While there are a certain number of "Why don't you play more 'Metalica'?" or "How do you get to be a TV host?" questions, the majority are surprisingly purposeful. Escort teachers vigorously cheer the statements that support more education and the challenges to success.

From the University's point-of-view, Communications Day

provides a vehicle to acquaint a large number of area students with the campus and its programs. This has been important to the University's transition from an all-male school catering to commuters to a regional university of some stature with a largely residential student population. Surveys taken during freshman speech classes (required) show that from 10 to 20% of the incoming freshmen from Greater Cleveland actually attended a Communications Day and a lesser number were aware of it but did not attend for their own or their schools' reasons. John Carroll's former dean of admissions considered the promotion period for Communications Day as particularly valuable in recruiting because it occurred at the precise time many area seniors were making their final decisions concerning the college they would attend. The publicity, plus the association with the other well known agencies would influence even those who were not interested in communications.

A number of less obvious tricks have been learned through experience. Besides not including apples, it has proven unwise to schedule two popular topics in the same room for the two afternoon sessions. It is virtually impossible to clear the room promptly for the second group, particularly when the first speakers are well known on-air personalities. No give-aways other than the items included in the registration packet are permitted. Before the rule was instituted one speaker showed up with T-shirts and concert tickets and nearly caused a riot. Likewise, the size of the gathering and the environment has tempted other entrepreneurs, but all these are turned away.

The support of the on-air community has been excellent. Several of WMMS's top DJ's always appear for at least one session as do WKYC's top news team and their leading sports personality who does NFL football on the side. Some of the speakers have appeared virtually every year since the start and cheerfully handle the barrage of questions. While some see the self-promotional value, others feel the opportunity to talk honestly and openly with the young audience is valuable to all.

The commercial media companies recognize the value of participating in Communications Day. Everyone is aware that other radio and television stations and the suburban newspaper chain would be delighted to jump in as replacements. As a result, the University insists on full, equal billing in all publicity as a Communications Day host. While the dollar value of the air time and newspaper space committed to promotion each year has not been calculated, similar purchased exposure for the University would run well into the thousands.

As a side note, a few years ago, as the result of some management changes, the radio station slipped in its participation and concurrent promotion. When the student surveys were tabulated, only eleven of those replying reported having first heard of the event on the radio station. The word got back to the parent corporation. At the next planning meeting a

corporate representative was there to insure all that there would be no further laxity. There hasn't been.

As the day approaches, each public relations department checks and re-checks their participants so that there are no last minute memory failures and few conflicts. The Communications chair has been checking regularly to assure that rooms have not been re-assigned to others, campus police alerted, the box lunches are ready, and that coffee and doughnuts will be available at 8:00 a.m. in the commandeered faculty lounge for earlier arrivers. This "hideaway" is maintained throughout the day so those appearing in two seminars can get a respite from their "public" if needed.

Conclusion

A "Communications Day" has many advantages for a small college. The key is the recognition of its potential by the local commercial media companies. They benefit from the association with the University and from having a positive educational activity to promote. With careful planning and sincere cooperation, a very valuable event can be carried off without a serious hitch.